

Marriage and *ilobolo* [Bridewealth] in contemporary Zulu Society

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We investigate links between the practice of *ilobolo* [bridewealth] and marriage outcomes in contemporary Zulu society. We present quantitative data which describe very low marriage rates particularly among Zulu adults, and which suggest also that the majority of Zulu adults identify *ilobolo* as a constraint to marriage. We use qualitative interview data to probe attitudes to marriage and *ilobolo*. Although most Zulu people we interviewed acknowledge material ‘abuse’ and commercialization in the practice of *ilobolo*, our interviews affirm also that *ilobolo* remains widely valued as a Zulu tradition and that it continues to be an integral and defining feature of a Zulu marriage. We suggest that this tension, between the high cost of *ilobolo* and respect for *ilobolo* as a custom, contributes to the very low marriage rates observed among Zulu people today.

INTRODUCTION

Many studies have documented changes in nuptiality patterns among Africans in South Africa in recent decades, and specifically, an increase in age at first marriage and a decline in marriage rates (cf. Garenne et al 2001, Hunter 2006, Kalule-Sabiti et al 2007, Hosegood et al 2009, Posel & Casale 2013). These trends are particularly pronounced among isiZulu-speakers who mostly live in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. In this paper, we investigate links between a distinguishing feature of African marriage, the custom of bridewealth, and these marriage outcomes, drawing from both quantitative and qualitative data. We focus specifically on the practice of bridewealth and marriage in contemporary Zulu society.

The custom involving the provision of marriage payments in cattle or cash, from the groom's family to the parents of the bride, is widely practised in Southern Africa and has various names among African language speakers: *ilobolo* in Zulu, *roora* in Shona and *bohali* in Sesotho. Historically the practice was an essential part of marriage negotiations, the wedding itself and was known to retain significance for the duration of the marriage. Evans-Prichard (1931:36) suggested the term "bridewealth" in order to avoid the implication that *ilobolo* was a question of wife purchase, and to recognise that the practice served to transfer wealth between families and generations. The usage of this term has become most accepted and, given our focus, will be employed interchangeably with the isiZulu term *ilobolo*.

Structural similarities exist between different bridewealth systems but each ethnic group has its own culturally idiosyncratic practices specific to local conditions (Kuper 1982: 157). *ilobolo* in Zulu society also has a unique socio-historical background (Gluckman 1950; Vilakazi 1962; Guy 1990). In South Africa, it was only in the former colony of Natal (now incorporated into the province of KwaZulu-Natal and home to the majority of Zulu people in South Africa), that the payment of *ilobolo* was formalized by the Natal Secretary for Native Affairs, Theophilus Shepstone, to ten cattle for commoners (plus the *ingquto* beast for the mother)¹, 15 for hereditary chief siblings, and 20-plus for the daughters of a chief (Welsh 1971). The payment of *ilobolo* was later codified when the first version of the *Natal Code of Zulu Law* was promulgated in 1878 and later revised in 1891 (South African Law Commission 1997). Most noteworthy in this context is the provision that ten *ilobolo* cattle had to be delivered on or before the day of the marriage.

In this paper, we use available quantitative data to document changes in marriage patterns, and to describe attitudes to marriage among a representative sample of African adults, and isiZulu-speakers specifically. The data which we analyze come from official household surveys regularly conducted between 1995 and 2008, as well as from a relatively recent survey of social attitudes among South African adults. Given the limited scope of the attitudinal data, we use qualitative data drawn from in-depth interviews with forty Zulu respondents, to probe how the custom of *ilobolo* is valued, how it has changed and the relationship between *ilobolo* and marriage outcomes.

Although African marriage rates are low and falling, most noticeably among isiZulu-speaking adults, the attitudinal data which we analyze show no evidence of an aversion to marry. In these same data, *ilobolo* is identified by half of all never-married respondents as the main reason for couples not marrying, and by over 60 per cent of isiZulu-speaking male respondents. The current cost of *ilobolo* is viewed as a concern also by almost all the respondents we interviewed, with many seeing this as the principal way in which *ilobolo* had changed in recent years.

We do not argue that *ilobolo* is the only reason why most Zulu people stay unmarried. However, we demonstrate that frequently the way *ilobolo* is practised, and particularly the amount that is requested relative to men's opportunities in the South African labour market, can contribute to delayed marriage and non-marriage in contemporary Zulu society. At the same time, our interviews affirm that the custom remains widely endorsed even among those who acknowledge a commercialization of the practice and who recognise that the need to pay *ilobolo* may reduce the likelihood of marriage. We argue that it is precisely because the custom is so highly valued and observed that large marriage payments would inhibit marriage.

Before presenting the quantitative and qualitative data analyzed in the study, we first review how low and falling marriage rates among Africans in South Africa have been explained, and the role attributed to *ilobolo* in this literature.

MARRIAGE DECLINE AND *ILOBOLO*

Historically, non-marriage among Africans in South Africa seems to have been rare (Preston-Whyte 1981) and marriage typically took place early (Garenne et al 2001: 277). However, both a fall in marriage rates and an increase in age at first marriage (since at least the 1960s) have been noted

and discussed in a number of studies, and particularly in recent decades, as the coverage of the population census has increased,² and as more comprehensive sources of demographic micro-data have become available (Garenne et al 2001, Hunter 2006, 2010, Kalule-Sabiti 2007, Hosegood et al 2007). These micro-data reflect self-reported measures of marriage, and therefore capture all forms marriage, including customary and civil weddings.

Among the several reasons offered for marriage decline, a key explanation for trends among Africans specifically concerns the ravaging effects of apartheid policies on family structure. At the same time as Africans, and men in particular, were pulled and pushed into mining and other industrial employment, their settlement at places of work was restricted (Mayer and Mayer 1974, Nattrass 1976, Beinart 1980). Migrants frequently were housed in single-sex hostels and influx control regulations limited the possibility of partners migrating, leading to prolonged periods of separation between couples. In so doing, migrant labour undermined “the ability of men and women to form long-term relationships” (Hunter 2006: 103). Other factors, which have been highlighted as contributing to marriage decline and marriage delay, include rising levels of education and increased economic opportunities for African women, as well as changes in marriage preferences, which it is suggested, have reduced both the need and the desire to marry early, if at all (Garenne et al 2001).

Several historical and anthropological studies have also drawn a link between changes in *ilobolo* practices and changes in marriage, specifically with respect to how the need to accumulate *ilobolo* payments could delay marriage. Dlamini notes that requiring full payment at the start of marriage, introduced in the Natal Code from 1878, could delay marriage until the total *ilobolo* amount had been saved (Dlamini 1983: 123). However, historical records suggest that this provision was not consistently observed. Although some fathers insisted on full cattle payment before a wedding, they were willing to “lend” their daughters to suitors on receipt of some head of cattle; other fathers continued to allow *ilobolo* to represent the promise to pay sometime in the future (ibid.: 123, 221). In an attempt to circumvent colonial rules on *ilobolo* practices, *invulamlomo* [mouth-opener] ceremonies were also introduced by Zulu men (Hunter 2010: 56), where the groom would offer a token payment, or bring a present for the father of the prospective bride, in order to decrease the *ilobolo* amount to be paid.

Moeno's research suggests that at least by the 1970s, the requirement of full payment before marriage still had not been commonly adopted in

rural areas, where payment was in cattle and could be honoured many years after the marriage (Moeno 1977). But in towns and cities, where payment was in cash, there was a greater expectation that *ilobolo* had to be settled before marriage could occur (ibid.). As a result, urban couples were “often forced to wait for a long time” while the man saved for *ilobolo* (ibid.: 77).

Not all studies found evidence of a relationship between *ilobolo* and marriage delays in urban areas. In her research on *ilobolo* practices among Africans living and working in the Durban Metropolitan Area in the 1980s, De Haas (1987) documents little support from her respondents that the payment of *ilobolo* forced couples to postpone marriage. Rather, the “single most important factor in delaying marriage, repeatedly stressed by informants, was the critical lack of accommodation in towns” (De Haas 1987: 41).

More contemporary research, however, suggests that *ilobolo* may be seen increasingly as a practice which can delay or even prevent marriage. In Shope's interviews with 600 rural African women including from KwaZulu-Natal, for example, “young women acknowledge that it has become more difficult for men to secure the money for *lobolo*; it may take ten to 15 years” (Shope 2006: 68). *Ilobolo* may have become “more difficult” to pay for two reasons: first, the size of the expected payment may have risen significantly; and second, men's ability to pay *ilobolo* (even if the payment has not risen) has declined.

Increases in *ilobolo* payments in recent decades have not been systematically documented,³ but several studies refer to the rising costs of *ilobolo*, which are particularly high in KwaZulu-Natal, and which have been associated with a commercialization of the practice (Hosegood et al 2010: 284). Shope argues that *ilobolo* has acquired “more of an economic imperative” where respondents indicated a tendency for families to use *ilobolo* for “material advancement” (Shope 2006: 68). In Burman and van der Werff's (1993) study which included isiZulu-speakers in KwaZulu-Natal, respondents also “described families as exploiting each other by making excessive demands” (Burman and van der Werff 1993: 119).

Even if *ilobolo* payments have not risen considerably in real terms, men's ability to afford *ilobolo* would have fallen as the payment has become more individualized⁴ and as unemployment rates have grown. De Haas (1978: 38) reports that in 1980-81, of 291 men who married according to customary rites in the Durban magisterial district, only *one* recorded having received assistance from his father. However, alongside this generational shift in the responsibility to pay *ilobolo*, men's access to

employment has also declined. The increase in unemployment has been particularly dramatic in the first decade after apartheid. From 1995 to 2003, for example, the number of unemployed African men and women in South Africa rose by over 4.2 million adults while the number of Africans in employment increased by a far more modest 1.6 million jobs (Casale et al 2004: 994)⁵. Unemployment rates in KwaZulu-Natal are among the highest in the country: for all Africans in South Africa, the unemployment rate grew from 36.3 per cent in 1995, to 49.5 per cent in 2003; in KwaZulu-Natal specifically, unemployment rates among African adults increased from 39.5 per cent to 51 per cent.⁶ The rise in unemployment rates has also been marked among younger Africans (35 years or less) of marriageable age (Kingdon and Knight 1997).

The years following the dismantling of apartheid legislation have brought increased access to education among Africans, raising the expectations of young African men to be the economic providers in the family. However, declining opportunities in the post-apartheid labour market have compromised the ability of young men to meet these expectations, producing conflicting trends which have been associated with a “crisis of African masculinity” (Campbell 1992, Morrell 1998, Hunter 2004, Waetjen 2006). In his research on changing gender relations in KwaZulu-Natal, Hunter therefore associates low marriage rates with men's “inability” to pay *ilobolo* in the context of high and rising unemployment (Hunter 2007: 695 and 2006: 103).

Over the years, the links between *ilobolo*, marriage and reproduction have also been dislodged (Kaufman et al 2001, Garenne et al 2001). Traditionally in the event of a premarital pregnancy, the woman would marry the father of the child and rights to the child would be transferred to the father's descent group through *ilobolo*. As rates of premarital pregnancy have risen, however, men have been able to claim rights to children, signified by the child acquiring the father's clan name, through the payment of *inhlawulo* (or damages) to the mother's family, the cost of which is considerably lower than the *ilobolo* payment (Hunter 2010: 145). Hunter's research suggests a further weakening of these links as young women become more likely than their mothers to accept their children taking their father's name, even without the payment of *inhlawulo*. In so doing, women feel that they are “better able to make claims on the father and his family” (ibid.).⁷

Notwithstanding these changes, studies also document that the custom of *ilobolo* remains highly valued, even in urban areas. De Haas finds that *ilobolo* in Durban in the 1980s was “increasingly seen as the distinguishing mark of a *black* as opposed to a white marriage” (De Haas

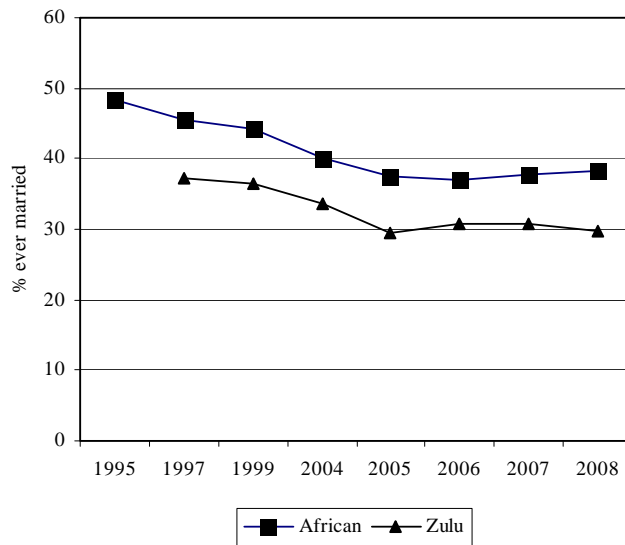
1987: 50). This is corroborated in subsequent research, which documents the importance of *ilobolo* as a source of African identity and pride in both rural and urban contexts (Walker 1992, Burman and van der Werff 1993). Although comparative studies on bridewealth practices have not been conducted across the different ethnic groups in South Africa, there is evidence to suggest that the custom is particularly supported and observed among Zulu people. Burman and van der Werff for example, find that seventy per cent of the Zulu respondents in their study expected the custom to survive in the future, compared to fifty per cent or less of other respondents (Burman and van der Werff 1993: 117).

Two ‘opposing’ trends therefore are identified in this literature. On the one hand, *ilobolo* has become more difficult to pay, related to a growing commercialization and individualization of the practice, as well as to high and rising rates of unemployment, particularly among younger adults. On the other hand, the importance of *ilobolo* in marriage is being re-attested as a marker of an African way. This tension may be an important reason for why African marriage rates are so low, although the attitudinal data which we present in the next section indicate that the majority of Africans want to marry. High rates of unemployment, and possibly more widespread support for the custom among isiZulu-speakers, in turn may be an important part of the explanation for why African marriage rates among isiZulu-speakers are the lowest in the country.

MARRIAGE RATES AND ATTITUDES TO MARRIAGE AND *ILOBOLO*: EVIDENCE FROM QUANTITATIVE DATA

Marriage among Africans in contemporary South Africa is far from universal; in fact among African adults (18 years and older), it is not even the norm. Demographic micro-data drawn from a range of nationally representative household surveys for South Africa, suggest that Africans are less likely to be (or to have been) married⁸ than to be never married. Furthermore, for the period over which comparable national data are available (1995 to 2008),⁹ there has been a clear decline in marriage rates, with the percentage ever-married falling by ten percentage points to 38 per cent in 2008.¹⁰

Figure 1. Percentage of African adults ever-married

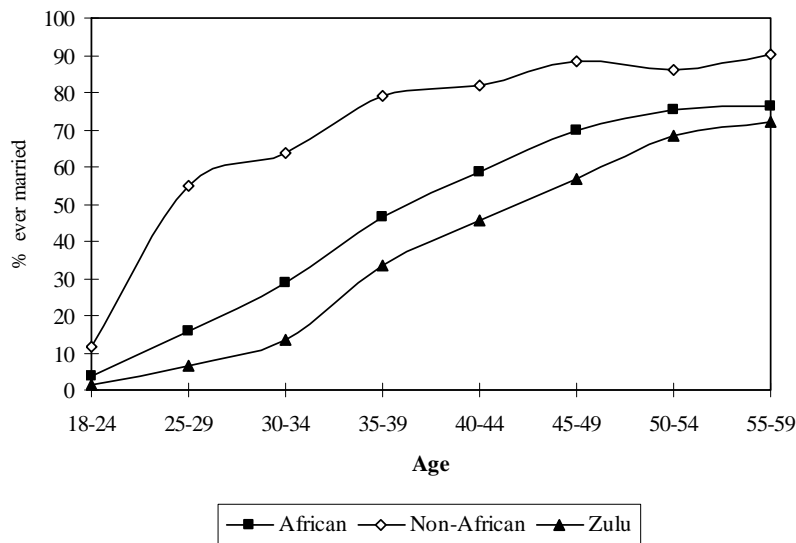


Source: Own calculations from the October Household Surveys (1995, 1997, 1999), the September Labour Force Surveys (2004 – 2007), and the National Income Dynamics Study (2008).

Note: The data have been weighted to represent population estimates. Adults are aged 18 years and older. Adults who are ever-married include those who are currently married as well as those who are divorced or widowed. Zulu adults cannot be distinguished from other ethnic groups in the 1995 data.

Among all the ethnic groups in South Africa, marriage rates are lowest among isiZulu-speakers.¹¹ By 2008, only three out of every ten Zulu adults was or had been married. Marriage rates are also considerably lower in urban areas, such that among Zulu urban-dwellers, only one out of every four Zulu adults was ever-married in 2008.¹² Marriage patterns among Africans are distinctive further because when marriage occurs, couples typically are far older. In 2008, for example, the percentage of non-Africans who were ever-married rose dramatically among 25 to 29 year-olds (by over forty percentage points), whereas it increased far more modestly among Africans of the same age cohort, and by even less among Zulu adults specifically (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Percentage ever-married by age, 2008



Source: Own calculations from the National Income Dynamics Study (2008).

Note: The data have been weighted to represent population estimates.

It is possible that attitudes to marriage, particularly in the context of high rates of HIV infection in South Africa, contribute to low and declining marital rates among African adults. However this view is not supported by available attitudinal survey data collected in the 2005 South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS),¹³ where 81 per cent of all never-married African adults either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I would like to get married someday”.¹⁴ Among a younger cohort aged 18 to 34 years, this increased to 89 per cent, at least partly because younger adults who wanted to marry are more likely to have married by the time they reached 35 years.¹⁵ Very low marriage rates among Zulu adults specifically are also not reflected in attitudinal differences to marriage: never-married Zulu adults are as likely as all African adults to report wanting to marry.

Table 1: Attitudes to marriage among African adults, South Africa 2005

	Want to marry (%)		
	All	Women	Men
Never-married African adults	86.0	82.3	89.3
Never-married African adults 18-35 years	89.5	88.9	89.9
Never-married Zulu adults	87.1	85.4	89.1
Never-married Zulu adults 18-35 years	89.9	90.0	89.8

Source: Own calculations from the 2005 South African Social Attitudes Survey.

Note: The data have been weighted to represent population estimates. Adults are aged 18 years and older.

Although marriage is viewed as desirable by most African adults, a gender imbalance in attitudes to marriage could contribute to high rates of non-marriage. There is some initial support for this suggestion, as among all never-married adults, a smaller percentage of women than men responded that they would like to marry. However, when married men and women are included in the sample (as wanting to marry), these gender differences narrow (89 per cent compared to 92 per cent), and they disappear among younger never-married women and men.

Increased scope for cohabitation may also be relevant to declining marriage rates. Available nationally representative micro-data from 1995 to 2008 indicate that the percentage of African adults (18 years and older) cohabiting, but not married, increased more than two-fold, although this was from a very low base of four percent.¹⁶ Cohabitation rates in urban areas are higher than in rural areas, and have risen by more (from four percent in 1995 to almost 13 percent in 2008)¹⁷, suggesting that there is greater freedom to form cohabiting relationships in an urban setting. Nonetheless, data from the SASAS 2005 also indicate that for most unmarried African men and women, cohabitation is not viewed as an acceptable alternative to marriage, among both urban dwellers (64 percent) and rural dwellers (65 percent).¹⁸ These attitudes help explain why, in the face of low marriage rates, cohabitation rates among Africans have not increased by even more (Posel and Casale 2013).

The SASAS 2005 included only one question on attitudes towards *ilobolo*, where respondents were asked to respond to the statement: 'The payment of *ilobolo* is the main reason why people do not get married these days'.¹⁹ Because the statement limits *ilobolo* to being 'the main reason' for non-marriage, responses may underestimate the extent to which *ilobolo* is viewed as being one of the contributing factors which

make marriage difficult.²⁰ Nonetheless, half of all never-married African adults either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. The percentage is higher among never-married Zulu adults, but particularly among Zulu men, where more than sixty per cent identified *ilobolo* as the main reason for non-marriage.

Table 2: *Ilobolo* as the ‘main reason’ for non-marriage: Attitudes among African adults

	<i>Ilobolo</i> is main reason for non-marriage (%)		
	All	Women	Men
Never-married African adults	50.2	50.9	49.5
Never-married African adults 18-35 years	50.4	53.3	48.2
Never-married Zulu adults	55.7	49.2	63.1
Never-married Zulu adults 18-35 years	55.7	47.6	63.6

Source: Own calculations from the 2005 South African Social Attitudes Survey.

Note: The data have been weighted to represent population estimates. Adults are aged 18 years and older.

Available nationally representative quantitative data therefore describe high, and increasing, rates of non-marriage among Africans although the clear majority wants to marry. In addition, Zulu male adults, in particular, view *ilobolo* as the main reason for non-marriage. Taken together, these findings might suggest a growing opposition to the custom, particularly among Zulu adults, where marriage rates are lowest and *ilobolo* is mostly likely to be identified as the key constraint to marriage. Information on support for the custom of *ilobolo* was not collected in the SASAS 2005. Rather, we use qualitative research to probe attitudes to *ilobolo* among Zulu adults, and to investigate further whether and why *ilobolo* is linked to low marriage rates.

ATTITUDES TO MARRIAGE AND *ILOBOLO*: EVIDENCE FROM QUALITATIVE DATA

The most recent in-depth qualitative study on *ilobolo* with a focus on the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal (De Haas 1987) dates back 25 years, before the transition to democracy and the resulting political and socio-economic changes which accompanied this transition. In this

section, we analyze qualitative data collected in 40 semi-structured, partly narrative interviews conducted from November 2010 to February 2011 with individual isiZulu-speakers based in the *eThekweni* region (Durban Metropolitan Area) of KwaZulu-Natal. The respondents all live in an urban setting and the qualitative data therefore do not speak directly to the practice of, and attitudes to, *ilobolo* in rural areas. However, a division between urban and rural in South Africa and in the province specifically, is far from rigid. Several of the respondents retained ties with family in rural areas, and among some married respondents, the customary marriage ceremony had occurred in a rural setting.

An equal number of male/female and married/unmarried Zulu adults were interviewed.²¹ The respondents ranged from 24 to 62 years of age, and their socio-economic characteristics varied widely. A few respondents reported no individual income, while the highest earning respondent reported a monthly income in excess of R30 000 (approximately \$3,750). Formal educational attainment was equally dispersed, ranging from no or very little schooling to having a doctoral degree. Although only half of the participants (ten male, and ten female) were married, almost everyone we interviewed had at least one child. Of the married females, all had been *lobola'd*, and all but one of the married men had paid *ilobolo* (the exception (P33) was married whilst living abroad and did not marry a Zulu woman).

In the lengthy, open-ended interviews, almost all of which were conducted in isiZulu and often in the interviewee's home, we collected information on a multitude of aspects relating to marriage and *ilobolo*. We broadly analyze the responses to selected questions on the way *ilobolo* is practised, but the analytical focus here is to interrogate to what extent the custom is valued and if the practice of *ilobolo* is perceived as a constraint to marriage.

THE VALUE OF *ILOBOLO* AS A CUSTOM

Ilobolo has not been a legal requirement for Zulu marriage since 1932 (De Haas 1987). However, the overwhelming majority of our participants viewed the payment of a negotiated *ilobolo* amount as a necessary precondition for the formal recognition of a union, whether in a customary or a civil/church marriage, and for the setting up of an independent household. Most respondents regarded *ilobolo* as a custom of paramount importance to Zulu people in general and to themselves in particular.

Among other questions, respondents were asked to rank the importance of *ilobolo* as a custom on a Likert scale from 1 (not important) to 10 (very important). A clear majority gave a ranking of 8 to 10; of forty interviewees, only four ranked the importance of *ilobolo* as 5 or lower, and a further respondent refused to provide a ranking for the custom because he did not “believe in it [*ilobolo*]” (P35). Although a few other respondents found the rating scale inappropriate, they nonetheless indicated that it was a salient Zulu tradition. Even individuals who struggled to identify the current purpose and functions of the custom, viewed *ilobolo* as having strong cultural value and as the *sine qua non* for a ‘proper’ Zulu marriage. Many interviewees argued along the lines of this excerpt: “To me, it [*ilobolo*] is simply important because it’s our culture. It’s something that shows to us, the Zulu people, who we are” (P10).

All but three of the respondents also expected the custom to be maintained in the future. Two of these participants ranked the custom as very important, but felt that the future of *ilobolo* was threatened either by generational change (P17) or by adverse economic change (P32). In other words, only one (P4) of the five participants who did not identify *ilobolo* as an important custom also did not expect the custom to survive in the future. Responses from the other four participants, as well as from a number of other interviewees, give voice to what could be described as the “collectivist nature” of Zulu culture (De Kadt 1998, Mkhize 2006). Even where respondents did not personally value *ilobolo* as important, or even where they expressed reservations about aspects of the custom, almost all felt that the custom would survive because of a Zulu cultural duty to observe the custom, and most did not believe that they had personal agency in deciding whether or not to practise *ilobolo*. Hence, the married male respondent (P35) referred to above, who refused to rank *ilobolo* as a custom because he did “not believe in it”, had nevertheless paid *ilobolo* to marry.

In addition to respondent P35, who had experienced great hardship in saving money to *lobola* his wife, a consistently negative attitude towards *ilobolo* was noted from only one other interviewee, an unmarried female (P4), who generally regarded *ilobolo* as an obstacle to marriage which forces women into illegitimate pregnancies. Another married female (P19) who experienced abuse in her own marriage felt that *ilobolo* had lost its purpose. She explained that originally *ilobolo* was an integral part of the important Zulu social tradition of *ukuhlonipha* [to respect] but “modern” life had dislocated this connection, and she concluded that today a *lobola*’d woman does not necessarily receive appropriate respect from her husband.

With the exception of these few dissenting voices, *ilobolo* was unanimously viewed as an essential part of Zulu culture and also as a marker that characterized Zulu marriage. These findings are consistent with De Haas' earlier (1987) research and indicate that the function of *ilobolo* as a “distinguishing mark” of a “black” marriage has been conserved during the post-apartheid period.

Successful *ilobolo* practice is a symbol of pride and respect, most of all for the groom and bride, but also for the parents and relatives involved. In simple terms, women regard being *lobola'd* as a reward for their good conduct and proof of their own value as well as the worth of their grooms, while many men interpret the ability to pay *ilobolo* as a marker of their Zulu manhood and capability to be a ‘provider’. These gendered constructions are consistent with Hunter’s notion of “provider love”, whereby a man's ability to provide for a wife, signalled by the payment of *ilobolo*, has become entwined with romantic love (Hunter 2010: 42). Among both the male and female respondents we interviewed, there is a sense of “doing things proper” (P37) if the marriage process, including *ilobolo*, is successfully practised. Hence, from a Zulu cultural perspective, having paid *ilobolo* or having been *lobola'd* are actions which dramatically improve the status of an individual and of his or her family in Zulu society. It is this profound anchoring of *ilobolo* in the Zulu cultural and social system that provides the custom with such saliency. However, like most customs, *ilobolo* is not static and is practised with considerable variation.

INDIVIDUALIZATION, IDIOSYNCRASY AND COMMERCIALIZATION

One of the most striking features of *ilobolo* in contemporary Zulu society is the highly individualized and idiosyncratic nature of the custom. Among the married men we interviewed, very few reported that their parents had provided financial help, and only two indicated that their siblings or extended families had contributed. A 55-year old male (P39) who was married twice and whose father had assisted with paying *ilobolo* for his first marriage, claimed that according to Zulu culture, the father of the groom should always contribute to the *ilobolo* payment for the first wife. Two others, who were of similar age (55-62 years), expressed views akin to P39. However, most of the married men we interviewed acknowledged that their fathers were not able to assist, either because they were deceased or they did not have the financial means to do so. Under these circumstances, several of the younger men felt that it was no

longer the responsibility of their fathers to contribute towards the payment and suggested that it was a task that they as Zulu men had to accomplish on their own.

With the individualization of the payment and its association with 'provider' love, the role of *ilobolo* in defining Zulu manhood and masculinity has become emphasized. This is evident also in the responses from our male participants when asked whether they would, or had, borrowed money to pay *ilobolo*. Almost all the men we interviewed emphatically replied "no", with the dominant view captured in the following response from a married man: "No, I worked damn hard for all the money. No one helped me out on this. It was my own duty. But this is the way *ilobolo* works; a man must work hard for it" (P31). The ability to pay *ilobolo* from his own income and savings was taken as a sign that a man was "ready to get married" (P33).

The idiosyncratic ways in which *ilobolo* is practised today is exemplified through the diversity in how the negotiations occur, the vast range of payments and number of gifts to extended family members of the groom and the bride, and the duration of the process. Furthermore, the participants in this study varied greatly in their interpretations of the current functions of *ilobolo*. Many respondents highlighted the cultural value and the creation of lasting, reciprocal relationships and responsibilities; many also regarded it as monetary thanks-giving to the parents of the bride; and others associated particularly a spiritual meaning with the custom. The scope of this paper does not allow a detailed discussion of these multiple functions of *ilobolo* and we address this issue elsewhere (Rudwick and Posel 2012). We focus here on the financial dimensions of the practice.

The vast majority of the respondents stressed that the amount of money involved in *ilobolo* "should be" of minor importance. However, our interviews indicate that many Zulu mothers and fathers have, or have had, distinct monetary expectations of the *ilobolo* process for their daughters.²² These expectations are articulated particularly through the compensatory function of *ilobolo*. In De Haas' research and in the anthropological literature, *ilobolo* is seen as providing compensation to the parents for the symbolic loss of their daughter and/or her labour power (De Haas 1987, Radcliffe-Brown 1929, Gluckman 1950, Ogbu 1978, Kuper 1982).

Among our respondents, however, it was much more the compensation for the efforts and costs involved in raising a daughter that were emphasized.²³ Several of the single mothers, for instance, who struggled

to raise their children, interpreted the *ilobolo* payment as a reward or payback for the hardship they had endured during pregnancy, child-care and education of their children.²⁴ One female interviewee (P5), whose monthly salary did not exceed R2000 specified that she expected a payment of at least R45000 for her daughter, arguing that after her past financial struggles she should now be able to benefit from her daughter's marriage. Other interviewees voiced similar sentiments along the lines of *ilobolo* as a reward for the child's upbringing. Some who did not emphasize the compensatory function nonetheless had concerns about the financial status of their son-in-law. While explaining that their daughter's happiness was their first priority, this was articulated primarily in terms of the future husband's ability and commitment to provide financially for his family. The payment of *ilobolo* was taken as evidence of these qualities.

When asked whether they would want *ilobolo* paid for their daughter, the large majority of interviewees therefore responded in the affirmative. Few parents openly admitted that they wanted to make a financial gain from their daughters, but almost all felt that *ilobolo* was required, and that a mere symbolic payment²⁵ was not an acceptable option. There were some exceptions, however, and particularly from four of the five respondents who had not ranked *ilobolo* as an important custom in their lives.

One married female interviewee, whose husband had found it very difficult to pay *ilobolo*, did not want her daughter's future husband to struggle in the same way and was willing to accept a small "gift" (P16). Similarly, the married male respondent, who had experienced great hardship in saving for *ilobolo* reported that he would not expect payment and wanted only that his daughter "loves somebody and that somebody wants to marry her" (P35). The two other respondents, an unmarried female (P4) and an unmarried male (P30), stated that they would rather the amount that would have been paid as *ilobolo* be used by the married couple, either as a deposit on a house (P4) or placed in a trust fund for the couple's children (P30). The fifth interviewee (P3), an unmarried female who had not rated *ilobolo* as an important custom, did not believe that individuals could choose not to practice *ilobolo*. Although she did not have a daughter, she acknowledged that her son would have to pay *ilobolo* because "we've got to accept other people's desires".

Almost all the participants, including those who expected sizeable *ilobolo* payments for their daughters, also acknowledged that a certain commercialization of the custom had occurred, a development which was viewed consistently as regrettable. In response to a question about what had changed in the practice of *ilobolo*, the large majority echoed the reply

that the custom had become “more expensive” (P2). This was attributed particularly to the payment of *ilobolo* in money rather than in cows, to increased economic hardship, and in some cases, to the “greed” of parents. The following excerpt from a female engaged to be married, and who embraced *ilobolo* as ‘our culture’, captures the general response among the participants: “There have been so many changes, we all know that. I think if we still paid with cows, things would be better. But today, there are some people who just so much need money that they ask for anything” (P10).

Because there is no fixed monetary rate for a cow, payment in money rather than in cattle increases the scope for negotiating the size of the *ilobolo* payment. While 11 cows are maintained as a standard payment among KwaZulu-Natal residents, the interpretation of *ilobolo* as compensation for the daughter's upbringing also provides space for parents to negotiate a higher rate for the *ilobolo* cattle. Many of the respondents acknowledged that *ilobolo* may increase with the education and professional status of the prospective bride, but the vast majority excluded this for themselves and viewed this as a negative practice that should not occur.

Most current Zulu *ilobolo* negotiations, described by the interviewees, are also only the beginning of a lengthy process which involves the exchange of gifts between the two families. In addition to *ilobolo*, the groom pays for gifts [*izibizo*] that are given to the family of the bride. There is also a substantial amount of food [*umbondo*] and a number of gifts [*umabo*], given by the family of the bride to the family of the groom, and which frequently are financed using part of the *ilobolo* payment. When asked what had changed in the practice of *ilobolo*, several participants referred specifically to an “abuse” in the practice of *umabo*, with the groom's family asking for very expensive gifts such as stoves and refrigerators.

Almost all the participants agreed that *ilobolo* does not have to be paid in full by the time of the wedding and referred to the well-known isiZulu proverb *amakhoti akaqeda* [lit.: ‘women do not get finished’, meaning, the payment for women never ends]. One of our informants (P37), who had acted as an *umkhongi* [*ilobolo* negotiator]²⁶ in several marriages, claimed also that the full payment of *ilobolo*, particularly as a once-off payment, before the wedding would not signal the groom's commitment to harmonious future relations with the bride's family. Nonetheless, we have numerous examples of marriage processes where either the groom or the parents insisted on the total amount being paid before the wedding. For the parents, this eliminates the risk that once married, the remaining *ilobolo* amount will not be paid; for the grooms, the motives seem

generally to be linked to not wanting to feel continuously financially obliged to the father-in-law. However, the interviews suggest that even where negotiations were very amicable and the *ilobolo* payments were not made in full, the amount paid before marriage typically required men to save for a considerable period of time.

In this context, we also discussed with participants whether a woman could possibly assist her partner financially by contributing to the *ilobolo* payment, thereby shortening the time taken to save for *ilobolo*. Several, and particularly male, respondents were indignant at the suggestion, with the experienced *umkhongi*, referred to above, saying that if the wife contributes, she would have *lobola'd* herself and “people would be laughing” (P37). Almost all participants emphatically stated “this is not done” [*akwenziwa lokhu*], but some acknowledged that there might be instances where this occurs. Although it is severely frowned upon for a Zulu woman to contribute directly to the actual *ilobolo* amount, a few women reported that they would be willing financially to assist their partners indirectly, by contributing more to living costs while their partners saved for *ilobolo*. There is also some evidence from our interviews, and mentioned by De Hass (1987), that urban women may get involved in their own *ilobolo* negotiations, something that would have been unthinkable in the past. Today, a bride may bargain with her parents to decrease an amount, or negotiate higher payment for an *ilobolo* payment that she felt ‘devalued her’.

ILOBOLO AND MARRIAGE: DESIRED BY UNATTAINABLE

Consistent with the quantitative data presented earlier, the overwhelming majority of the unmarried interviewees, both female and male, reported wanting to get married one day. They were also specifically asked whether they thought the practice of *ilobolo* had made it more difficult for them to marry. Most women, who want to marry, responded in the affirmative. The link between *ilobolo* and non-marriage was made forcefully by the two unmarried female respondents who did not rank *ilobolo* as an important custom. In response to the question, the one participant declared that “*ilobolo* should be over and done with because it is not good”. She continued saying that “our daughters are getting old, having unclaimed children at home. I would not have had my baby at home if this *ilobolo* thing was not there. A lot of people would have been married” (P4).

However, five of the remaining eight unmarried female participants who ranked *ilobolo* as a very important custom expressed similar views. One respondent claimed that *ilobolo* “delays everything where you end up not being married because maybe the person who wants to marry you can’t afford (it)” (P6). Another said that “the reason we are not married, and we get old in our mothers’ homes is because of *ilobolo*. I wish it can be stopped – but they will never do that because it is culture” (P7). Noteworthy in the last sentence of the extract is the shifting from the 1st person singular pronoun ‘I’, to the 3rd person plural pronoun ‘they’, suggesting that the respondent does not perceive herself to have individual or personal agency in matters of Zulu culture.

Several of the men also stated that they would possibly be married already although, in contrast to the quantitative data presented earlier, this view was acknowledged less often and less emphatically in the interviews with unmarried men than with unmarried women.²⁷ Almost all the unmarried men who were interviewed pointed to the rising costs or the commercialization of *ilobolo*, but few attributed their single status to having to pay *ilobolo*. Rather, most of the men indicated that they did not feel financially ready to get married, and that they wanted to be in a better socio-economic position by the time of marriage. As noted earlier, the ability to pay *ilobolo* was taken as a sign of this readiness. Thus as one unmarried male respondent commented, “I would be in a marriage, but not happy” (P26). However, one participant also acknowledged that his relationship had ended because his fiancé considered the process between the first *ilobolo* negotiation, initial payment and actual planning for the wedding as taking too long (P27).

In contrast to De Haas' (1987) study, we therefore find far more recognition, particularly among unmarried Zulu women, that the payment of *ilobolo* may delay or even prevent marriage. However, for the most part, this is not accompanied by a rejection of the custom. On the contrary, even those who voiced reservations during the interviews, about the commercialization of the custom and the difficulties of marrying,²⁸ still acknowledged *ilobolo* as an important Zulu custom which most feel obliged, and often proud, to maintain for complex cultural, social and spiritual reasons.

CONCLUSION

In contemporary South African society, isiZulu-speaking adults are far less likely to be married than non-married, although most isiZulu-

speakers report wanting to marry. The reasons for marriage being an unattainable goal are complex and varied, but in this study we present evidence that the practice of *ilobolo*, in addition to the other costs involved in a Zulu marriage process, can contribute to the difficulties men and women experience today.

In both the quantitative survey data and the qualitative interview data which we analyze, *ilobolo* is identified as a constraint to marriage. Our interviews suggest that this is linked both to the individualization of the custom, which has increased the responsibility on prospective husbands to save for *ilobolo* through their own earnings, and to what is seen to be a commercialization of the custom. An increasing emphasis on the monetary aspects of the custom is associated with *ilobolo* being more expensive now than it was in the past. However, at the same time as the expectations on African men to pay a sizeable *ilobolo* have increased, so economic opportunities in the South African labour market, and particularly for younger men, have been eroded. This has reduced men's ability to pay *ilobolo*, producing the typical disjuncture associated with a crisis of masculinity.

The interviews in this study reveal widespread respect for *ilobolo* as a custom. In most cases, *ilobolo* is embraced by Zulu adults as a distinguishing feature of an African marriage, as an integral aspect of Zulu culture and as a marker of Zulu manhood. But even where individuals are more circumspect, very few believe that they have the personal agency to decide whether or not to practise *ilobolo*. *Ilobolo* therefore remains an integral part of a Zulu marriage, explaining why high *ilobolo* demands would constrain marriage in Zulu society.

ENDNOTES

¹ While all ten cattle generally went to the father of the bride or the male kin, the *ingquto* beast was reserved for the mother and is meant to represent the daughter's virginity.

² The first population census in South Africa which included the former Bantustans (Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei) was only conducted in 1996.

³ A report from the South African Law Commission (1988: 59) states that over time, "the amounts paid in bridewealth have increased enormously", but it does not provide data or a reference for this claim.

⁴ An individualisation in the payment of *ilobolo* historically has been linked to land dispossessions during colonial rule, which resulted in fathers no longer having the means to assist their sons with payment (Hunter 2010).

⁵ These figures represent "broad" unemployment, which includes both the searching and the non-searching unemployed.

⁶ Own calculations from the 1995 October Household Survey and the September 2003 Labour Force Survey. By 2003, unemployment rates among Africans were highest in the North West Province (59 per cent) and the Eastern Cape (54 per cent), followed by KwaZulu-Natal.

⁷ With these changes, Hunter (2008) suggests also that instead of being providers within marriage, men have become providers outside marriage, with some men providing income support to multiple girlfriends.

⁸ Ever-married includes adults who are currently married, whether in a customary or a civil marriage, as well as those who are divorced or widowed.

⁹ Marriage and cohabitation are not distinguished in the surveys from 2000 to 2003, and therefore the percentage ever-married cannot be determined for these years.

¹⁰ In contrast, marriage rates are considerably higher among the other population groups in South Africa (particularly so among Whites and Indians where approximately 80 per cent of all adults in 2008 were ever-married), and marriage rates have not fallen systematically over the period.

¹¹ Ethnicity can only be identified using information collected on home language spoken. This information was not collected in the 1995 October Household Survey.

¹² In 2008, 42 per cent of all African adults in rural areas (and 34 per cent

of rural Zulu adults specifically) were ever-married, compared to 35 per cent of all urban Africans (and 26 per cent of urban Zulu adults).

¹³ The South African Social Attitudes Survey was conducted through the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and is designed to be nationally representative. Questions on attitudes towards marriage were asked of approximately 3 000 adults.

¹⁴ Question 94, p. 9 of the SASAS 2005.

¹⁵ Individuals who wanted to marry when they were 18 to 35 years are more likely to have married by the time they reached 36 years, leaving a larger share of the unmarried sample in the older age cohorts who would prefer not to marry.

¹⁶ Own calculations from the 1995 October Household Survey and the 2008 National Income Dynamics Study.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Respondents were asked whether it was 'all right for a couple to live together without intending to get married' (Question 91, SASAS 2005, p.9). The statistics provided represent population estimates of respondents who reported 'strongly disagree' or 'disagree'.

¹⁹ Question 91, SASAS 2005, p.9.

²⁰ Given the leading nature of the statement, the survey also does not elicit any information on other factors that respondents may view as constraining marriage.

²¹ Unmarried female participants are labelled P1 to P10, married female participants are P11 to P20, unmarried male participants are P21 to P30, and married male participants are P31 to P40.

²² This includes fathers who themselves have not paid *ilobolo* and who remain unmarried to their current partners and mothers of their children.

²³ In her study on *ilobolo* practices in Lesotho and Zimbabwe Ansell (2001) identified a similar emphasis on *ilobolo* as compensation for the daughter's upbringing.

²⁴ Due to the frequent absence of fathers from South African households, our interviews suggest that single mothers are increasingly the recipients of the *ilobolo* payment for their daughters. With high mortality rates in the context of HIV/AIDS, siblings of deceased parents or older siblings of the bride, if involved in her upbringing, may benefit from the *ilobolo* payments.

²⁵ Records suggest that historically, a man who had no cattle may have been permitted symbolically to count stones and marry on the basis that the cattle paid for the groom's first daughter would belong to the father-in-law (Dlamini 1994: 20).

²⁶ Appointees of the groom, traditionally an older family member and a close friend, carry out the *ilobolo* negotiations as well as the actual financial transactions. These *abakhongi* have the responsibility of ensuring that the negotiations are harmonious and successfully transacted.

²⁷ One possible explanation for why, in an interview context, men were less likely than women to identify *ilobolo* as a constraint to marriage is because of the strong association which men made between the ability to pay *ilobolo* and their masculinity.

²⁸ In addition to these issues, some respondents also voiced concerns about how *ilobolo* could undermine a woman's position in marriage. Examples were given, where the husband abused his wife but she nonetheless stayed in the relationship for fear of her parents having to return the *ilobolo* payment.

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